

Part VI

Skeptic: If you're so smart, why aren't you so rich? If it's as simple as all that, why is it taking thousands of years for man to be convinced? If all we have to do is open our eyes to a truth which is staring us in the face, why hasn't it already happened? Maybe I'm blind, but is everyone else blind, too?

Believer: No, it's not as simple as all that. The truth is indeed staring us in the face, but the factors which are blinding us from fully perceiving it are formidable.

Skeptic: What happened to your "light and darkness" metaphor? Didn't you say that light is real, while darkness has no substance? That the moment a light is kindled, darkness fades away?

Believer: Certainly. Light is a positive force, while "darkness" is nothing, only the absence of light. This is why all the good that has been accomplished throughout the generations has an accumulative effect--each positive deed brings us that much closer to perfection, whereas evil is transitory and of no enduring significance. But that fact that darkness is insubstantial does not mean that it is not formidable. As long as it exists, the darkness which clouds our vision and distorts our priorities poses a difficult and complex challenge. Because this moral and spiritual blindness is deeply entrenched in human nature and behavior.

Skeptic: But as you see it, the world has already seen the light. The global consensus is against war, against hatred, against exploitation. So why is man still acting the way he does?

Believer: The Talmud has an axiom that says: "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison." This basic truth applies to every aspect of reality: in mathematics, an equation cannot amount to more than the sum total of its parts; in physics, a river cannot climb higher than the elevation of its source; in philosophy, an argument is only as strong as the axioms it is based on; in psychology, the mind can relate to something only in the context of self. Etc., etc., etc. The bottom line is, no entity can transcend what it itself is. Everyone is for world peace. But within the miniature universe that is man, "World Wars" are raging all the while: conflicts between mind and heart, between conviction and habit, between spiritual aspirations and material wants. We fluctuate between self-interest and our moral conscious, between indulgences of the moment and our long term goals. How can we hope to create a harmonious universe if we are forever battling our own selves?

Skeptic: You know, I'm afraid that behind the philosophical sheen that coats your words lurks a self-righteous preacher, lambasting lust and greed as the undoing of humanity. You're assuming that man's base and selfish drives are what stand in the way of a better world. But I don't think that we can be so quick as to do away with them---they might prove to be not quite as dispensable as you would like to think.

Believer: Why do you say so?

Skeptic: Earlier, you referred to the collapse of communism as an example of the ultimate supremacy of right over might. But do not forget that there is another side to the story---the economic side. Obviously, we would like to pride ourselves with the notion that we won the Cold War on moral grounds; but in the view of many sociologists, it was more a matter of economics than ideology. The undoing of communism was not so much its G-dlessness, its violations of human rights or its corruption of power, as its inability to function economically. In terms of natural resources, the Soviet Union was arguably the richest country in the world. It had the agricultural capacity to sustain all of humanity. So why was it unable to feed its own people? Because it had neutralized the most powerful--if not the only--incentive that drives the human animal (yes, animal) to do anything: the drive for self advancement. On paper, communism is beautiful--almost messianic in its idealism and perfection. Everyone giving it their all for the common good. Each contributing according to his abilities and receiving according to his needs. No greed, no jealousy, no exploitation. What selflessness! Compare this with capitalism or even socialism---everyone grabbing as much as they can for themselves, slaving and flattering and bullying their way to the top, all for the sake of satisfying their vanity and material appetites (and if the sight of human suffering makes the capitalist somewhat uncomfortable, he allows society to place some minor curbs on his greed and to provide a "safety net" for its victims). And yet, as our experience has undeniably shown, a system

which runs contrary to the “base and animalistic” drives of man just won't work. No one will do anything. Worse still, it becomes the environment in which the most horrendous atrocities are committed in the name of the highest idea. On the other hand, a society such as ours, in which the dominant elements are individuality and self-interest, is the soil in which justice and equality may take root and flourish, albeit imperfectly. Your holy books might not agree with this, but, ultimately, “lust and greed” is what drives the machinery of civilized existence.

Believer: Let me tell you a story that is related in the Talmud. Once, the sages of Israel decided to make an all-out effort to eliminate the evil inclination. They all gathered at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and fasted for three days and three nights, praying that the world be cleansed of its animalistic nature. G-d acquiesced to their request. The evil inclination, in the form of a lion of fire, was handed over to them as their captive. For three days it was held in a cage of lead. The result? The world ground to a halt. Men and women felt no inclination to marry. Chickens stopped laying eggs. No one showed up for work in the morning. So instead of killing the lion, as originally planned, the sages blinded it in one eye and set it free.

Skeptic: That's exactly my point: there is no escaping our basic natures. So all this talk of a selfless utopia is not only a naive fantasy---it is a dangerous one as well. We basically have two choices. We can try to suppress the animal in man, as many authoritarian regimes and ideologies have attempted to do, with disastrous results. Or, we can accept our limitations. We can accept that man will always act in self-interest, and respect each other's right to do so. We can accept that there will always be injustice and suffering in the world, and seek to minimize it.

Believer: So that's all we can do---seek to lessen evil?

Skeptic: What other approach is there? How else would you deal with the human ego without throwing out the baby with the bathwater?